DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 407 562 CE 073 995

AUTHOR	Oliver, Carol; Wills, Gordon
TITLE	Embracing the Internet. DETC Occasional Paper Number 14.
INSTITUTION	Distance Education and Training Council, Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	Mar 96
NOTE	24p.
AVAILABLE FROM	Distance Education and Training Council, 1601 18th Street, N.W., Washington, DC 20009-2529; http://www.detc.org ($5).
PUB TYPE	Guides - Non-Classroom (055)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Business Education; *Computer Uses in Education; *Delivery Systems; *Distance Education; Educational Practices; Foreign Countries; Higher Education; *Internet; *Program Development; Teacher Student Relationship; *World Wide Web
IDENTIFIERS	*International Management Centres (England)

ABSTRACT

Since November 1995, all programs/processes of the business school of the International Management Centres (IMC) of Buckingham, England, have been conducted through the Internet. As in other distance education programs, students join the IMC program from any country in the world. Programs are always delivered to "sets" of 8-16 people who meet, pace their studies together, and are encouraged to critique one another's assignments before they are submitted for evaluation. IMC's website functions as the following: active site for all necessary courseware and administrative procedures used at IMC; interactive destination for all associates, faculty, and graduates of IMC; linkage to the body of knowledge needed by associates to complete their studies; and news and information service. By largely replacing use of the telephone with electronic mail, IMC has reduced its operating costs considerably. Using the Internet has reduced IMC's costs of delivering courseware globally by well over 50% and has given associates the capability of "on-demand" printing. IMC's Internet program has experienced only a few minor snags: students must be computer literate, delays and blockages sometimes occur, and maintaining an up-to-date and interesting website is a labor-intensive process. (Eight sample pages from IMC's website are included.) (MN)

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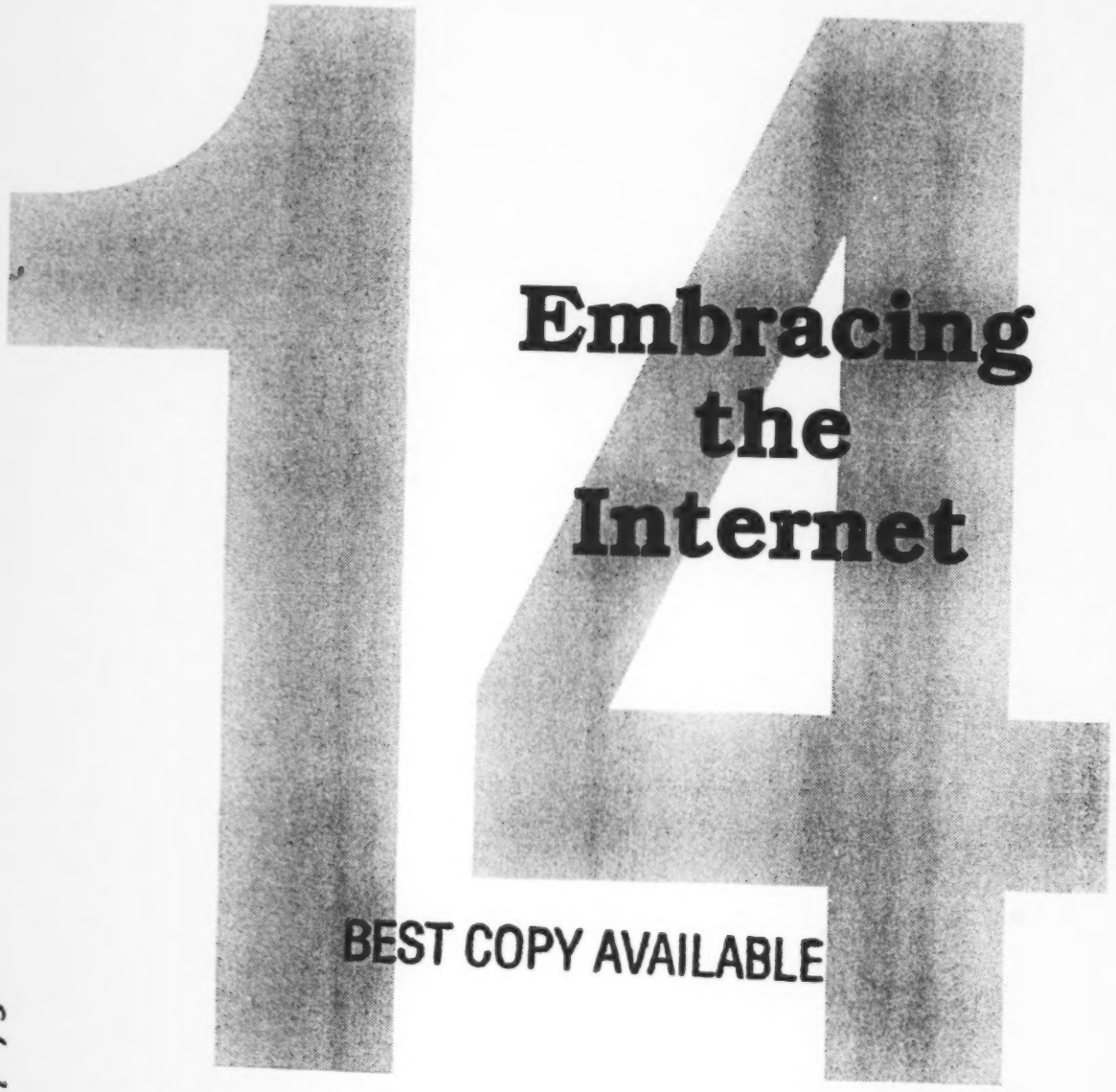

Embracing the Internet

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DETC OCCASIONAL PAPER NUMBER 14

by

Carol Oliver and Dr. Gordon Wills, International Management Centres

Printed by The Hadley School for the Blind, Winnetka, Illinois

Published by the Distance Education and Training Council, Washington, D.C.

March 1996

DETC OCCASIONAL PAPERS (formerly *NHSC Occasional Papers*) are essays intended to stimulate and encourage candid exchanges of ideas between distance study professionals. For a complete set of *Occasional Papers*, write or call the DETC.

Introduction

Most of us in distance education regard the Internet phenomenon today with a mixture of awe and foreboding. And that mixture is appropriate.

There is little doubt that the Internet, using the World Wide Web and similar formats, will change forever the way we conduct distance education. The dilemma is when and how—and who should go first?

We volunteered to contribute this Occasional Paper because our Business School, International Management Centres, has gone for cyberspace totally. Since November 1995, all of our programs and processes are driven through the Internet via **http://www.imc.org.uk/home.htm**—if you can connect there please do so at once. You are most welcome.

Why Did We Jump?

Much of what we do as distance educators is totally familiar to that which all other DETC members do. Students (in our case practicing managers whom we call "Associates") join our programs from any country in the world.

However, when delivering our programs, we always use what are termed "sets" of 8 to 16 people—who meet together and pace their studies together. They are encouraged to critique one another's assignments before they are submitted for evaluation to supplement the advice our tutors give. Our tutors meet their sets face to face, normally rotating the "classrooms" to the premises of the Associates themselves.

The courseware for our programs used to be shipped by mail from our central warehouse in England to all corners of the world—to places

like Finland, Curacao, New Zealand and Papua, New Guinea to the Netherlands and Gibraltar. The MBA program included thirteen large box files. They regularly got damaged. The postal services, even air freight, were often unreliable. Non starts and product damage often accounted for 40% of all materials shipped globally.

To be cost effective, the courseware was produced in batches with a shelf life of two years or so. Each Associate was then given guidance in tracking down the best local library to supplement the courseware when it came to writing his/her dissertation.

Control systems were typically excellent just prior to a DETC on-site examination and always as graduation approached. At other times, they were less than excellent. Keeping central administrative services informed of address changes and other administrative details were the main priorities.

Associates world-wide, and faculty, wanted to share and compare outside of their local sets. But they had to communicate through IMC in the UK to make connections. While we did this with enthusiasm, it was cumbersome. The whole world of IMC was unable to meet and talk with one another except at our annual Congregation when the Associates graduated in a splendid and academic ceremony. Attendance at these Congregations averaged about 400-700. This event toured the globe—Kuala Lumpur (1992), Queensland, Australia (1993), Yorkshire, England (1994), Amsterdam (1995) and Helsinki scheduled for 1996. Six months in between Congregations, we run an Annual Professional Congress to talk amongst ourselves. Attendance is about 60-100. Again, it tours the globe—England (1992), Johannesburg (1993), Hong Kong (1994), and Curacao (1995).

It was at our Congress in England in November 1992 that Dutch and Australian faculty argued that many of the hoped for benefits from such a multicultural Business School could, in theory, be much better

achieved if we used the new electronic methods just becoming available. At that time hardly anyone in the room had an e-mail address, but it sounded like a good idea.

We did not proceed as many wise folks would, to prepare a feasibility study and discuss how to fund such a move. We simply got started! (Our educational philosophy at IMC is "action learning." Which quite simply means acting to learn rather than learning to act.)

By July 1994 we had created, not an Internet site, but a Bulletin Board System (BBS) for all of our activities. The cultural mode for IMC integrated all the administrative and courseware processes and mastermined the news and information exchanges. Each region of the world, and each set of Associates, had their own BBS connected to the central system.

The wildcat BBS we adopted taught us a great deal about how to organize our data and information. But, as we anticipated, most Associates were unable to connect to the BBS regularly and thus didn't benefit much. Most faculty were slow to come to terms with it. More importantly, it failed to galvanize our international community to share and compare as the system matured.

By March 1995, the Congress meeting in Curacao resolved that we should move to the Internet at once—and we went online at our Amsterdam Congregation in November 1995.

The IMC Internet Site

Our site on the Internet is made available to us by MCB University Press—the largest academic and professional management publisher in the world. We employed talented young technicians who are wholly comfortable with computers and challenged them to create a site that would be:

1. An active site for all necessary courseware and administrative procedures we use at IMC;

2. An interactive destination for all Associates, Faculty and Graduates of IMC;

3. A linkage to the body of knowledge needed to support Associates all over the world to complete their studies, e.g., a virtual library of professional journals; and,

4. A news and information service.

Because our courseware and administrative files had been originated for the BBS it was relatively easy to convert them to the Internet. By mid-1996, with the use of Adobe Acrobat software, the pages available for downloading by Associates as they proceed will look virtually as they would in print. Full text articles with copy input clearance appear alongside the course structure. Associates are further directed to abstracts of articles where the full text will be supplied to meet a 24 hours dispatch service level from the British Library.

Interactivity is a demanding and time consuming process—and of course will only happen when Associates and Faculty are fully conversant and comfortable with the new technology. As such, we are including interactivity as a required exercise in each course. Associates must log on at least four times each week and their assignments must have built in them evidence of sharing and discussing with other colleagues on the Internet. News items can be posted directly from around the world via linked e-mail from the Internet pages to the News Bulletins edition. Pictures can be scanned in and so indeed can sound be included (but we have not done this yet).

The Economies of Internet

E-mail has predominantly replaced the use of the telephone. Attached/ posted files have replaced the mail and fax. The cost savings to IMC have been considerable.

The biggest savings, and the greatest benefits, however, have occurred in the courseware we provide. Gone are the staggering postal costs and the loss/damage we experienced. We now boast of having six monthly updates of the references given to the Associates as they study their courses. We are no longer saddled with central printing and warehousing. We now have "on demand" printing for Associates. The cost of delivering much more up to date courseware globally has fallen by well over 50%.

Is the Internet a Sales Medium for Distance Education?

Much of the Internet hype you read about suggests it is the greatest new sales medium ever invented. This has not been our experience, nor frankly have we striven to make it such. Internet is an accompaniment to our sales efforts of course. Potential Associates can browse our site. We place no restrictions on access to what we offer—even our courseware. Passers by, the curious Web page reader, training managers, all can demonstrate it and use it for their own purposes if they are so inclined.

Nobody who has not registered with us as an Associate, however, can gain our tutorial support work with fellow Associates, submit assignments or earn our credentials. Our philosophy is that as long as we are moving ahead successfully we do not begrudge someone who wants to eavesdrop.

A more pro-active approach could be followed provided the approach is respectful of the nature of the medium, i.e., the customer must be interactive rather than passive. Irritating or unwanted junk e-mail to targeted audiences is most unwelcomed. That does not mean, however, that list servers should not be used—you can contribute to these approaches by getting successful graduates and current students to talk about their achievements. Neither does it prevent you ensuring that the titles you give to your pages include key words which are wholly relevant to what you offer. "Word search" or hyperlinks are now available to enable you and potential students to crawl across the net finding as much as they can about a specific topic.

Anyone arriving at our site will find that our program brochures and our application forms are there for downloading and submission by post or by e-mail. They are posted in one smooth operation that creates them in a format that enables processing for hard copy printing or Internet play.

What does the Student Experience on the Internet?

Many of the comments which follow are simply a replay of what a good distance education institution does already. The Internet for distance education involves these issues:

- Each student must come to terms with being online and using the Internet. Most people under 25 have no problems at all. Most people over 35 may have some psychological problems. To deal with this dilemma, we have put younger people in charge of our system. We run Cyber Cafes and hands on workshops world-wide for those who need reassurance and help in getting started. We have standard practice routes with templates for focused searching (not surfing) on the Internet.

- Each student downloads that section of the courseware appropriate for the next study period.

- Each student relates with his/her tutor and with fellow students tackling similar assignments—using an Internet meeting place/ Newsgroup for the purpose.

- Assignments are sent as attached files to an e-mail that is sent to the tutor, whose marks and comments are returned the same way.

The vital differences are that the whole process of interaction can be done much faster on the Internet than with postal exchanges. And students can offer help and consolation to one another as they go along. This helps to overcome the obvious loneliness of many distance education students. Our experience to date has been that the method has greatly improved our course completion rates.

How Our Faculty Uses the Internet

Faculty members are naturally most active when they are tutoring a specific set across the world. In addition to this task-driven relationship, however, we have ensured that IMC's central office has Internet benefits as well. The Annual Professional Congress for 1996 is being run as a combination "virtual" conference from March/September at three face to face places—in Kuala Lumpur, Lismore, Australia and Guildford, England. Each meeting lasts three days, and each picks up from the Internet where the other left off—plus the views from the "virtual" conference of those who could not attend in person.

The focus papers of those who lead workshop sessions are available on the Internet well before the face to face sessions. Discussions at the on-site meeting are based upon focus papers which have been read beforehand. Each workshop leader can already have reactions from

individuals before the sessions start. Discussions can therefore build on these exchanges from the outset of the meeting.

Faculty can follow distance education progress at no charge with IMC—to further improve their skills. They can access all details of IMC's Academic Board's deliberations, the program Regulations and Ordinances. They can take advice from tutors globally who have tackled similar assignments elsewhere.

What are the Snags?

Here are just a few:

- The biggest snag currently is the technology. Students have to be properly organized and be computer literate. This is potentially an obstacle for anyone over 25.

- Even when organized, the Internet still has its fair share of delays, blockages and frustrations. The server you choose to use will go down from time to time. "Connectivities," as they are called, will get lost.

- Graphics, which make pages look pretty and often make the course more compelling, take a long time to download. For the near term, avoid using too many graphics.

- The task of keeping your site up to date and interesting is very labor intensive. Most of us underestimate how tough this is. The students and faculty members want to see something "new" each time they visit your home page site. If not, the desire to make repeat visits will dwindle away.

When the system works well, it is awesome. Its capacity for interactivity is its most significant contribution. Provided that you

staff-up adequately to handle the Internet, it will be a major breakthrough for distance education.

What Do You Do Next?

If your institution is not yet using the Internet, unless there are very exceptional reasons, it should start right away. There is no reason to delay your entry into cyberspace!

The best advice that we can give from IMC is:

- Do not simply get a home page which you hope will generate leads. It almost certainly won't.

- Get a home page by all means, but use it to complement and supplement all of your existing promotional media. Publish your home page address in every school publication and ad.

- Go further. Get demonstration course sessions up on the Internet, which prospective students can see—and sample—and show viewers how the constructive feedback and servicing aspects of distance education work.

- Get some of your successful alumni and graduates to e-mail you and agree to be testimonial-givers for prospective students. Publicize their e-mail address on your home page as a source of reassurance to other prospective students.

- Get all your faculty to come to terms with the Internet. Form a Newsgroup with them as soon as you can to keep in constant touch—share your problems and successes. If you can, run Cyber Cafe's for them where they can share and compare, and show one another how to make the best use of technology.

- Once the faculty are trained and ready to go, offer one of your more popular courses on the Internet—not instead of but as well as. Chose one where the enrollments come from students who are already comfortable with the Internet.

It should take you no more than 12 months to get on the net. It is less expensive than you might think. Get a young staff member to take charge of the project. They will relish the opportunity and the challenge.

Conclusion

If you are already on the Internet and want to share your ideas with us, please e-mail the authors of this paper at carolo@mcb.co.uk. If you are not on the Internet yet, do not be daunted. The medium of information captured and disseminated through the Internet is here to stay—albeit that a great deal of refinement is still needed. We are now in the "silent movie" era of development, but the "talkies" are just around the corner. The future of distance education is multimedia interactive communications at prices we can all afford.

Internet will not sweep away the need for face to face contacts, nor student concerns, nor the need for elegant paper certification on completion of courses. But it opens new vistas on the old concern of distance educators. It has the ability to transform the courseware cost/benefit equation and to enrich the learning equation.

Keep the technology in perspective. It is only there to serve the paramount educational goal: changing peoples' lives for the better.

The Authors

Ms. Carol Oliver has spent 10 years with International Management Centres, Buckingham, England, as Program Manager and Executive Multinational Registrar. She was responsible for the operation of both the BBS and Internet systems between 1993-1995.

Dr. Gordon Wills is Principal and Professor of Customer Policy at International Management Centres, and was a founding member in 1964. He has written widely and is also currently Marketing Director of MCB University Press and responsible for the transition to electronic publishing of 150 journals. He has global marketing responsibilities at MCB University Press, but is especially responsible for the Asia Pacific, the fastest educational growth market in the world today, with active partners in Tokyo, Hong Kong, Macau, Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Brisbane and Sydney.

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K. Howard

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nwynder@mcb.co.uk

Last updated on Friday, October 27 1995

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Enter Meeting Place

Meeting Place Information Page

This a useful document which you may wish to print or bookmark for future reference

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Please use Netscape to access your Set Meeting Place. A free copy of Netscape can be obtained from Netscape Communications. If you have any problems with the instructions on this page, please email nwynder@mcb.co.uk, who will try his best to help.

This page contains information you will need to be able to post, read and reply to messages in your Set Meeting Place. Once you have familiarised yourself with the Meeting Place instructions, click the "Enter Meeting Place" button located at the top/bottom of the page. There is also an imc.test Meeting Place - somewhere you can test message posting/reading/replying without leaving test messages in your Set Meeting Place.

- Pointing Your Browser to the IMC News Server
- Posting a Message / Article
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- A description of navigation buttons in the Netscape News Reader
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Pointing Your Browser to the IMC News Server

You will need to follow a few simple guidelines to ensure you have access to the conferences available to you. *Please note that you do not need to do this if you are using Netscape 1.1 or higher, as this browser will automatically point you to the Meeting Place.*

1. You will need to tell your 'browser' (eg. Netscape or Mosaic) where to look for the Meeting Place. This can usually be achieved from your 'Options' menu - sometimes called 'Preferences' or 'Configuration'.

2. Change the option titled "News Server" or "NNTP Server" (Network News Transfer Protocol) to **www.mcb.co.uk**
   Please make a note of the News Server name already entered into this field. For example, CompuServe users will have **news.compuserve.com** which is the option for all CompuServe Internet users.

3. For those not using Netscape 1.1 or higher, if you subscribe to any other newsgroups, you will need to change this option back to your service providers' news server name.

Posting a Message / Article

Posting an article (message) in your Meeting Place makes it available to all other Set members. You may wish to use this facility to request information / help from other Associates & Tutors.

1. To post a message in your Meeting Place, enter, and you will see navigation buttons at the top and bottom of the list of existing messages. Click the "Post New Article" button, which will bring up a mail window, into which you will enter your message.

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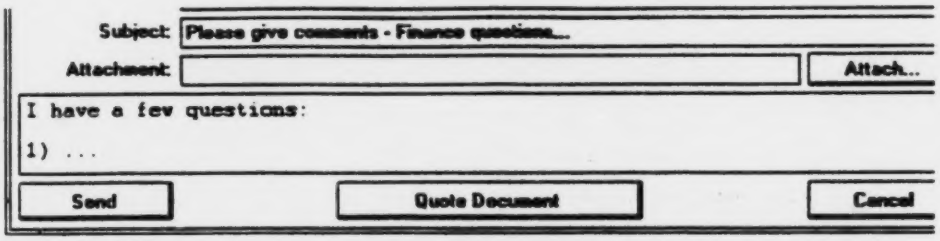

2. This window will already contain the name of the Meeting Place you are posting to, plus your name and email address (if available) will be entered into the 'From' field. You will need to do the following:

   - Enter a *subject*. This will be displayed in the Meeting place as **bold** text - indicating the start of a new Subject.
   - Enter a *message* into the message window. The message can be as long as you like - you can even attach text files that you have written off-line.

3. When you have entered your message, press the **Send** button. Your browser will send the message information to the Meeting Place. To view your message, you will need to the Meeting Place page.

If you wish to test posting, enter the imc.test Meeting Place.

Reading and Replying to a Message / Thread

To read a message in your Meeting Place, simply follow the blue link you wish to view, in the normal way. You will be presented with the message, and a set of buttons much like the following:

1. Moves you *back* through a *thread*. A thread is a list of related messages, usually a conversation about a particular topic.
2. Moves you *forward* along a thread.
3. Moves you *back* a whole thread (takes you to the previous subject).
4. Moves you *forward* a whole thread / subject.
5. This button marks the thread / subject you are currently reading as *read*. This means, depending on how your browser is configured, that the whole thread will either be:

   - removed from your view completely, or
   - turned red to show that it has been read

6. Reloads the Meeting Place - this is the same as presing the 'Reload' button. Requests that any other postings which have been made to the Meeting Place since you connected are displayed to you.
7. Takes you to your list of *subscribed newsgroups* - meeting places and other conferences you have 'bookmarked' as newsgroups you read regularly.
8. Brings up another mail window, which automatically inserts the 'Subject' from the message you are reading, and then posts your message to the Meeting Place, adding it to a list of messages about the

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same subject / thread.

9. As above, but emails your message to the author you are replying to, as well as adding it to the Meeting Place.

Navigation Buttons in Netscape News Reader

When you enter your Set Meeting Place, there are navigation buttons at the top and bottom of the list of existing messages. The navigation bar should look something like this:

1. The Post New Article button allows you to post a new message into your Meeting Place. See Posting a Message / Article above.
2. The Catchup All Articles button tells your browser that each of the messages in the Meeting Place have been read. This means that messages you have read will not be displayed unless you specifically request them.
3. The Hide / Show Read Articles button lets you re-display (or hide) articles you have marked as read. Your browser may automatically hide messages after you read them, so if you wish to see them again, this is the button to use.
4. The Subscribe button allows you to add the Meeting Place you are currently reading to your list of 'Subscribed Newsgroups' - a list of the Meeting Places / Newsgroups you read often. This list can be a useful navigation tool if you read many different newsgroups.
5. The Subscribed Newsgroups button takes you to the list of 'Subscribed Newsgroups' as mentioned above.

[redacted] Home Current Sets News & Info IMC Info C/Ware [redacted] email us!

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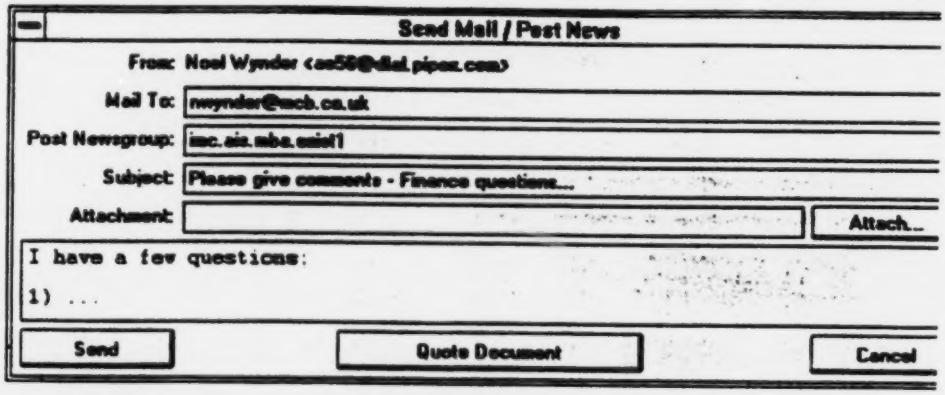

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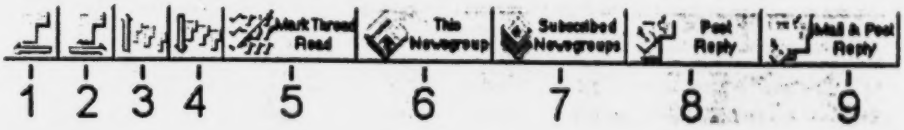

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7. Takes you to your list of *subscribed newsgroups* - meeting places and other conferences you have 'bookmarked' as newsgroups you read regularly.

8. Brings up another mail window, which automatically inserts the 'Subject' from the message you are reading, and then posts your message to the Meeting Place, adding it to a list of messages about the same subject / thread.

9. As above, but emails your message to the author you are replying to, as well as adding it to the Meeting Place.

Navigation Buttons in Netscape News Reader

When you enter your Set Meeting Place, there are navigation buttons at the top and bottom of the list of existing messages. The navigation bar should look something like this:

1. The Post New Article button allows you to post a new message into your Meeting Place. See Posting a Message / Article above.

2. The Catchup All Articles button tells your browser that each of the messages in the Meeting Place have been read. This means that messages you have read will not be displayed unless you specifically request them.

3. The Hide / Show Read Articles button lets you re-display (or hide) articles you have marked as read. Your browser may automatically hide messages after you read them, so if you wish to see them again, this is the button to use.

4. The Subscribe button allows you to add the Meeting Place you are currently reading to your list of 'Subscribed Newsgroups' - a list of the Meeting Places / Newsgroups you read often. This list can be a useful navigation tool if you read many different newsgroups.

5. The Subscribed Newsgroups button takes you to the list of 'Subscribed Newsgroups' as mentioned above.

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"Action Learning is a means of development, intellectual or physical, that requires managers, through responsible involvement in real, complex and stressful problems to improve their observable effectiveness henceforth."
Professor Reg Revans
IMC President Emeritus & Father of Action Learning

The International Management Centres (IMC) exist to help managers become more effective. By requiring them to work on real issues from their own organisations anywhere across the world, using "*Action Learning*", unprecedented results can be achieved.

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APC this year takes place from the 1st of March on the Internet, as well as three international 'face-to-face' Congresses. Follow this link to join our Virtual Conferences, and obtain information on the international meetings.

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- Action Learning International - an international forum for all involved in action learning processes to share and compare views, and to be up-to-date on events being organised.

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